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AUSTRALIAN ASSN. FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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THE AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY INFLUENTIAL SINCE ITS FOUNDING. HOWEVER, IT IS STILL NOT CONSIDERED PROFESSIONAL BECAUSE OF ITS LACK OF RECOGNITION AS THE ORGANIZATION ENTRUSTED WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COMMUNITY'S INTERESTS IN THE FIELD OF ENGLISH EDUCATION. THE FIRST STEP TOWARD MAKING IT SUCH A BODY IS TO BRING TOGETHER, IN ONE ORGANIZATION OR AFFILIATION OF ORGANIZATIONS, ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE ENGLISH-TEACHING PROFESSION, INCLUDING THE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS OF ENGLISH. AT THE SAME TIME, TEACHERS IN THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS MUST ENTER THE FIELD OF RESEARCH AND CRITICAL INQUIRY. TEACHERS MUST ASK AND SEEK TO ANSWER SUCH FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS AS--(1) IS ENGLISH, PROPERLY SPEAKING, A "SUBJECT" AT ALL, (2) WHAT DON'T WE TEACH THAT WE SHOULD, AND (3) WHAT COULD WE DO BETTER BY NOT TEACHING. WHEN WE KNOW THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS WE MAY BE LED TO RELINQUISH SOME OF OUR ELABORATE TEACHING TECHNIQUES BECAUSE THE REASONS FOR WHICH WE HAVE PERFECTED THESE TECHNIQUES ARE NO LONGER VALID. RESEARCH, FOR EXAMPLE, MAY SHOW THAT PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ARE INCAPABLE OF DEVELOPING ADEQUATE CRITICAL JUDGMENTS IN LITERATURE, AND, THEREFORE, WE SHOULD DEVELOP STUDENTS' APPRECIATION FOR LITERATURE AND TRAIN POTENTIAL WRITERS MUCH LIKE ATHLETES. ON THE OTHER HAND, RESEARCH MIGHT INDICATE THAT CRITICAL JUDGMENT CAN BE DEVELOPED ONLY BY THE OLD TECHNIQUES OF AUTHORITARIAN DRILL AND TRAINING IN THE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE UPON WHICH CULTURE AND TASTE DEPEND. TEACHERS MUST, THEREFORE, BE OPEN-MINDED AND WILLING TO GIVE UP TRADITIONS AND TEACHING TECHNIQUES IF THEY PROVE TO BE DELUSIONS. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA," NUMBER 5, AUGUST 1967. (DL)

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A. D. HOPE

Presidential Address

Professor A. D. Hope is best known as one of Australia's leading poets, and currently holds the chair of English at the Australian National University at Canberra. He has been president of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English since its formation in 1965. Earlier in his career, he taught in secondary schools in New South Wales, and his understanding of teaching has been invaluable in guiding the new association.
The text of his address to the Australian Association in April of this year manifests his concern for the state of English teaching in Australia today.

One of the most striking things about the teaching of English in this country in the last decade has been the growth of a strong professional spirit among the teachers. This strong sense of their profession has been marked by the formation in some cases, in others by the renaissance, of professional associations, and particularly by the foundation two years ago of the federal association, which you have done me the honour to make me president of. The schools are far ahead of the universities in this—for there is still no association of university teachers of English, no journal, and little demand for one.

I need not remind you, however, that the teaching of English is not yet a profession in the fullest sense of the word. You are, it is true, a corporate body whose object is to promote, improve and maintain the standards of the subject and the skill you profess; you have moved a long way from the days when I first entered your ranks, when associations of teachers seemed to many of us to be concerned more with trade union principles and aims than with professional ethics and standards. But even today we lack the main thing that marks out a true professional body as opposed to those which simply *call* themselves professions for reasons of snobbery or self-interest. The chief mark of a profession is that it is responsible, and is recognised as responsible, for itself as the body to which the community entrusts its interests in one particular field. In this sense the law is a corporate body which includes

judges, barristers and solicitors, though each may have its own formal body of association, united in a common tradition of seeing that the law is preserved, studied, improved and kept in respect. Others may make the laws and others may administer them. The legal profession as such is responsible for saying and knowing what the law and the spirit of the law *is*: they are its repository and its guardian and society recognises them as such.

I think we can hardly say that this association, whatever its energy and ideals, whatever the respect it commands, is yet recognised in the community as the body responsible for expert advice and for saying what ought and ought not to be done by those who administer education in this country. We are still a long way from the position in England, where, for example, advice and research on the teaching of English since 1964 has been entrusted to the SCHOOLS COUNCIL, which is largely a body of *teachers* of English. But what happened in England in 1964, and to some extent in the United States in 1962, may happen here in 1968 if this association maintains its standing, vigour and enterprise. That date will have been reached, I believe, on the day when this association becomes the recognised authority on the teaching of English, the day when the Minister for Education approaches it to conduct and plan research or to advise and devise a new syllabus of studies; it will be the day when the control and disciplinary power over qualifications and membership of the profession is in the hands of the profession itself. It will be the day when this association or some other has the standing with the community that is now enjoyed by bodies like the B.M.A., the A.M.A. or the Bar Association.

It is perhaps a paradoxical situation that one part of our profession, the university teachers of English, who have very little professional organisation and practically no corporate sense of themselves as a profession, enjoy full professional status. They have full power to decide what study and research is needed, what shall go into their courses and how they shall teach, who shall be members of their profession and who are not qualified to be so. The other, and larger part of the teachers of English have shown the corporate sense and have the organisation and show the responsible attitude to their subject, but do not enjoy the professional recognition and privileges. It is as though that part of the profession which enjoys authority in the matter of knowledge—whether rightly or not—was paralysed and inert, and that part which had the vision, the energy and skill lacked the power to command recognition which only the authority of knowledge can give. The first step towards amending this is obviously to bring all members of the profession together in one organisation—though this may better be done by affiliating a number of professional bodies, than by dissolv-

ing them all in one organisation. But it is not enough to wake the university members of the profession from their colossal inertia: the teachers in the schools must themselves enter the field of research and critical enquiry, the thing which gives the university teacher his professional autonomy. And the universities must make their facilities available for research into the problems of education in the subject, as well as the subject itself. The Schools Council of England in its Third Working Paper, *A Programme for Research and Development in English Teaching,* published last year, lays emphasis on the fact that its programme is to be carried out in the schools, by teachers of the schools and at the same time points to the massive Office of Education English Program begun in the United States as a project of the Federal government in which twelve major universities co-operated in the research programme for the schools. Australia is behind in both these approaches but it is moving in these directions, and it is, I believe, the English teachers themselves, through their associations, who are helping to give the lead—though so far the amount of research going on is pitiably small.

I do not want simply to congratulate you or to indulge you with a Barmecide feast of good things still in store. I want rather to talk about the dangers to which professionalism is always prone and in particular to speak of the opportunities which may be missed if we fall prey to those dangers. In this I shall speak of our whole profession from the kindergarten teacher to the research professor at a university, whose teaching is limited to supervising the work of advanced specialist scholars. But I shall have in mind chiefly the teachers of the primary and secondary schools.

The main danger that faces a profession that values its standards and its skills, is that the skills themselves, which are only a means to an end, may easily and quite unconsciously become ends in themselves, a vested interest which determines the treatment of the subject and limits the practitioners' view of it. Medicine is a profession particularly liable to this disease and its history is one long record of bitter opposition to new views in medicine and to new methods of treatment. It is not the bad doctors who have usually been responsible for the opposition, but the good ones to whom established practices have become sacred.

Now one of the things I notice in reading the books written about the teaching of English, in reading the articles written in professional journals, and in listening to teachers of English at meetings and conferences, is the large amount we discuss *method*: how to interest fifth grade children in poetry, how to teach grammar, how to teach *Hamlet*, how to organise creative writing, how to plan and run a school theatre,

how to use the school library to the best advantage. These are real and proper professional interests. But I am sometimes struck by the relatively few occasions on which these same books, journals and meetings actually discuss works of literature as such or question the reason for doing these things at all or for doing them in the way we do. Neither do they seem often to be asking some of the fundamental questions which the English and the Americans are asking themselves today. If I may say so the subject English would seem to be accepted. It is mainly the methods which appear to be in question. This is symptomatic (or it may be) of what I call the less satisfactory side of professionalism—the vested interest in method which automatically stops our thinking about problems which might require us to scrap the methods altogether; the vested interest in highly complex skills which makes it unthinkable that we might find these skills unnecessary or obsolete. An amusing instance of this is the way newer and more ingenious methods of teaching formal grammar continue to be put forward in spite of the fact that research has failed to show that teaching formal grammar is much more useful than cat's cradle—having indeed as its main justification of the fact that it can be made a diverting and amusing game played for its own sake. Even so the time might be better spent at chess or scrabble. It is only recently that proper research has suggested an entirely new approach to the topic.

Now among the fundamental questions that the Schools Council is encouraging teachers of English to ask themselves—and which it is providing time and research opportunities to find the answers to—are such things as the following:

Taking the present 'subject' of English in schools as it is:

1. Is English properly speaking a 'subject' at all? If so, what part of it is a 'subject' and how many separate subjects does this odd mass of traditional topics really contain?
2. What don't we teach that we should?
3. What could we do better *by not* teaching?

These are all questions we do not know the answers to, and the real answers, if we knew them, might lead us to give up some of our beautifully elaborated techniques, because the things we have perfected them for are no longer worth doing. We spend a great deal of time doing something that we call 'teaching literature', for example. This means, as it is practised at present, that we discuss and analyse a play, a novel or a poem, in the hope that this will lead our pupils to understand and appreciate better, and this seems a good thing to do. But under the pressure of public examinations and current fashions this process leads on to criticism and what we try to teach is the skill of

literary judgment. Boards of examiners influenced by universities are constantly complaining that our pupils are poorly equipped in critical ability when they leave school. Perhaps they are. But have we asked the fundamental question of whether at that age they are capable of anything but the most rudimentary critical judgment, as the failure of so many devoted and expert teachers might suggest? Are we perhaps driving at something that cannot be done? Are all the articles and discussions on 'How to Teach *Hamlet*' and 'How to Anlayse *The Wind in the Willows*', all the carefully devised techniques not possibly as futile as the carefully elaborated techniques by which medical science at one time tried to cure madness on the assumption that an insane man had a devil in residence, or stomach complaints on the assumption that the body of the patient had an excess of bilious humour? It was with a view to drawing attention to our lack of knowledge on fundamental questions that I once suggested that for all we know English should not be a subject at all. For the purpose of argument it should perhaps be treated like musical appreciation or football—possibly somewhere between the two. Those who wished to read and those who wished to hear music should have time and some guidance for this delight—but not be required to study, to sit for examinations or to use the creations of the poets as chopping blocks for their critical ingenuity. Those who showed a bent and an aptitude for writing should be treated like those who showed an aptitude for football or swimming: be given coaches and encouraged with praise and brought on by expert training. English would then disappear from the curriculums except for teaching the basic skills of reading, speaking and writing—and everybody might be much happier, including the teacher of English, who would then find himself in the interesting and perhaps rewarding position of something between a sports coach and tourist guide to the Earthly Paradise. It is not impossible that accurate knowledge might suggest such a solution. But it is perhaps just possible that investigation of one of these might show that what is wrong is too much cultural activity, too much general reading and too little thorough and organised discipline. The great medieval humanist, historian and philosopher, Étienne Gilson, brought up in the austere, and, some think, the rather pedantic tradition of French scholarship, in late middle life did what few continental, and very few French scholars ever do, he left his native land and settled in North America. He was asked some years ago to give his impressions of American Education. He surprised everybody by picking out College Football as the only sound item in its curriculum. Why? Because it was taken thoroughly seriously. It was competitive. You had to be good to stay in the game, and there was enormous prestige in staying in. So the footballers produced by the system were really good. The teaching

of literature on the contrary was permissive, it was based on the fallacy that taste and culture can be taught directly, instead of being the by-product of hard work, intellectual analysis and a thoroughly competitive struggle to be first in the skills and knowledge on which real taste and appreciation depend. Too much education and too little instruction! was roughly what his criticism came to. I often think of this as I watch my own pupils trying to come to grips with one of the classics of English literature, without the necessary equipment: the knowledge of the language, the knowledge of the Bible, the knowledge, however rudimentary, of the myths and legends of Greece and Rome that their task requires. Just sheer knowledge for a start! And, as for the skills required to respond to demands made by a poem like *Paradise Lost* on the mind and heart, they are like people suddenly put on the stage and asked to dance a classical ballet. At such moments I begin to wonder whether the old, limited, severe, and rather authoritarian *training* and *drill* in elements, now rather out of fashion in the so-called cultural subjects, are not due for a return.

These are two extreme views and I am putting both of them forward quite seriously because either may be true—the practice of our profession, I suggest to you, is not based on investigation, on research and experiment, in a word upon accurate knowledge. All this has still to be done. It is largely based on traditions and fond beliefs, which may be well founded but may be delusions. What seems to justify them is elaborate techniques and skills we have developed. Perhaps these skills are justified, but perhaps—and I sometimes suspect this is the case—investigation would show that we are like the medieval alchemists. Their techniques were infinitely subtle, beautifully precise, elaborately justified by the most profound theory of their subject. There was just one little thing wrong: the facts of the chemistry and physics of material substances had not the faintest connection with their theories about them.

What are the facts about human capacity, about the nature of our subject, about what it is possible to do with it and what it is desirable to do and what it is better to leave alone. These are questions that we ought to be able to answer if we are to justify our claim to be a profession, and not a society for the preservation of 'Ancient Recipes and Old Wives' Tales'.

To take examples: the teaching of English in Australia still largely follows the pattern laid down at a time when English meant the literature and language of the educated classes in England. There were lesser breeds without the law, but they were not part of education. Today we live in a world in which the English-speaking peoples have no single centre of literary culture any more, and there is no longer

a standard form of spoken English. It cannot be said, I think, that the syllabuses of study in any state in Australia reflect or try to come to terms with these facts. We are still thinking in terms of whether we should or should not introduce some Australian or American literature into *English*—ignoring the fact that English is now the literature of the whole English-speaking world, of which not only the United States and Australia, Canada, New Zealand are part, but India, Pakistan, the West Indies and large parts of Africa, where it is the literary language of hundreds of millions. To cope with this situation—just to realise what the new situation is, is perhaps the greatest professional challenge we face. The basic research going on in America and England of which I spoke, cannot be left to England and America, as some people assume. The new English-speaking world and the new English literature and language can only be dealt with if, in each country the part of the problem peculiar to that country is undertaken as part of one investigation of what is one world of English.

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THE AUTHORS: Ken Levis is in charge of English at Alexander Mackie Teachers' College in New South Wales. Apart from his academic work, he is a well known short story writer. Eve Lewis is principal of Forest Lodge Primary School.

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